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Ben Russell

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## PORTRAITS ON SARCOPHAGI

BIRK (S.) *Depicting the Dead. Self-representation and Commemoration on Roman Sarcophagi with Portraits*. (Aarhus Studies in Mediterranean Antiquity 11.) Pp. 333, b/w & colour figs, b/w & colour ills. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2013. Cased, DKK349.95. ISBN: 978-87-7124-018-4.

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This book has two clear aims, one broad and one rather specific: first, it explores what portraits contributed to the way sarcophagi were read; second, it focuses in on gender values and their projection in sarcophagus decoration. The question of individuality is germane to these discussions and much of the analysis concentrates on the varied ways in which commissioners selected, combined and adapted standardised themes or sets of motifs to communicate personal messages. The addition of portraits to standard figure types or mythological characters was central to this process. On mythological sarcophagi, these portraits focused attention, linking the virtues of the deceased and those of mythic exemplars. Portraits also highlight the multivalency of mythological scenes, revealing how commissioners adapted the range of ‘interpretative options’, as Z. Newby describes them, that these narratives offered (‘In the Guise of Gods and Heroes’, in J. Elsner and J. Huskinson [edd.], *Life, Death and Representation* [2011], p. 209). But portraits were also widely employed in non-mythological decorative schemes, especially on ‘Metropolitan’ sarcophagi produced in Rome. What this volume does, for the first time, is produce an extensive catalogue of all of these sarcophagi with portraits (a total of 676 examples). The accumulation of this enormous dataset is one of the most important contributions of this volume and B.’s discussion is at its best when mining this catalogue.

The first chapter, ‘Images for Contemplation’, sets the scene for the discussion that follows: who commissioned sarcophagi and how they were produced; portraits and the construction of identity; the funerary context; and the symbolic value of blank portraits. B.’s aim in this section is not to provide new readings for individual motifs or scenes; on this front, the path well trodden by P. Zanker and B. Ewald is largely followed (*Mit Mythen leben* [2004, English translation 2012]). The focus instead is on the active combination of different imagery to communicate highly personal messages. Arguing that portraits were the primary motif on the sarcophagi they adorned, B. shows how their attributes were used to communicate distinct sets of values, which were then supplemented or modified by additional imagery (secondary and tertiary motifs), so providing different ‘glimpses of personhood’ (p. 40). The *choice* of imagery is crucial here, and particularly the question of who made this choice and how they made it. Sometimes the individual honoured would have been the commissioner but often it would have been the heir who chose how the deceased was remembered, which has obvious implications for our understanding of whose identity was being constructed. Production methods also impact on this discussion. If sarcophagi were routinely bought off the shelf, near-finished, as often assumed, then what opportunity to exercise choice did the commissioner really have? B. stresses that standardised imagery need not exclude choice and that the arguments in favour of production-to-stock sarcophagi have been overstated, a route much scholarship on sarcophagus production is now taking (see B. Russell, *The Economics of the Roman Stone Trade* [2013], pp. 293–301). Production processes responded to the desire for individuality that B. is so keen to identify rather than placing restrictions on it.

In the second chapter, ‘*Exempla Virtutis*: Portraits and Self-Representation on Sarcophagi’, B. focuses more narrowly on how varied types of imagery, when combined

with a portrait, could be used to communicate different messages. Four categories of images are highlighted: ritual scenes, such as sacrifice or marriage scenes on *uita romana* sarcophagi; representations of 'learned figures' – Muses, philosophers, individuals holding scrolls or musical instruments; mythological scenes; and hunting scenes. While much of this section deals with why these scenes were used and the virtues that they espoused (*uir-tus*, *pietas*, *concordia*, etc.), the most interesting results to emerge from B.'s analysis, once again, relate to the selection and combination of types of images and how these changed over time. Particular sets of virtues, for instance, are communicated by sarcophagi on which the same individuals are shown in both a *dextrarum iunctio* scene and as 'learned figures' in flanking panels (*concordia* and intellectualism – as on cat. no. 640). A more unusual juxtaposition is found on the sarcophagus from the San Callisto catacombs on which a 'learned figure', clasping his scroll, is integrated into a lion hunt scene (cat. no. 494); education and manly *uir-tus* are not mutually exclusive qualities but it is rare that they are celebrated in a single image. B. is able to show (via graphs) that representations of 'learned figures' take off markedly in the early third century, reaching a peak in the fourth quarter of the same century (p. 77, graph 2). Specifically male role models, like generals and hunters, were gradually being replaced in the third century A.D. with more unisex iconography.

The gender specificity of sarcophagus imagery is most thoroughly explored in Chapter 3, 'Visualising Gender', and it is this section that is in many ways most novel. B. demonstrates that portraits of men and women on sarcophagi are found in roughly equal numbers (p. 121, graph 6). Significantly, by the third century A.D. at least, men and women were also routinely using the same or similar figure types for their portraits, including 'learned figures' and even mythic equivalents – such as Endymion (for men) and Ariadne or Rhea Sylvia (for women). Two hunters, on sarcophagi in Nieborow Schloss (cat. no. 489) and San Sebastiano (cat. no. 511), are even identified as women – though I would not rule out the possibility that both of these portraits are re-cut. Imagery of activities traditionally regarded as suitable for female representations is largely absent: scenes of motherhood or wool working are rare. From this B. concludes that 'sarcophagus imagery is not pre-gendered' (p. 156). While this is convincingly demonstrated for a wide range of figure types (notably 'learned figures') it is still evident that most hunting scenes, or motifs celebrating *pietas* and *clementia*, are associated with men. Equally, though women, when depicted alone, are often shown as 'learned figures' holding scrolls, in scenes of men and women together, as a married couple, it is almost always the man who is given control of the scroll.

A striking phenomenon on which B. has an intriguing take is cross-gendered imagery. B. has discussed this theme elsewhere (in J. Elsner and J. Huskinson [edd.], *Life, Death and Representation* [2011], pp. 229–60) but it is one that deserves reconsideration. A significant sub-section of the portraits catalogued in this volume are placed on bodies of the opposite sex. Some of these appear to be re-carved – and many would argue that most of them probably were – but even when this can be proven it is interesting that the resultant cross-gendered image was deemed acceptable. And B. raises the possibility that cross-gendered images might have been produced (rather than re-carved) deliberately to express very particular virtues or characteristics, hinting at more nuanced attitudes to gender in the Roman world than have been assumed.

Gender divisions were certainly more fluid when it came to children, the subject of the final chapter, '*Filiae Innocentissimae, Filio Dulcissimo*: Commemorating Children'. This is the shortest section and, though useful as an accompaniment to the other chapters, adds little to Huskinson's work on children's sarcophagi (*Roman Children's Sarcophagi* [1996]). Gender again is a major theme: rarely on the imagery on children's sarcophagi

is the sex of the deceased made explicit and even distinguishing between portraits of girls and boys is notoriously difficult. A number of parallels are drawn between these child and adult sarcophagi, however, such as the prominence again of 'learned figures' and the way in which different motifs are combined to build up a more multifaceted picture of the deceased – the cock-fighting and 'learned figure' combination on a sarcophagus in the Museo Nazionale Romano (cat. no. 36) is a case in point.

This is an extremely well-produced and well-illustrated volume – and, considering this, very reasonably priced. The catalogue is useful and the graphs are clear, though it would be useful to have a breakdown of total numbers and percentages for each. There are places in which the English could have done with a final edit and others where the prose could have been tightened up to avoid repetition; the number of examples employed to support each point made could comfortably have been trimmed down. This volume is a thought-provoking contribution to the rich and vast scholarship on sarcophagi.

*University of Edinburgh*

BEN RUSSELL  
[ben.russell@ed.ac.uk](mailto:ben.russell@ed.ac.uk)

## SCULPTURE FROM ROME AND TIVOLI

DUTHOY (F.) *Sculpteurs et Commanditaires au II<sup>e</sup> siècle après J.-C. Rome et Tivoli*. (Collection de l'École Française de Rome 465.) Pp. viii + 198, pls. Rome: École Française de Rome, 2012. Paper, €68. ISBN: 978-2-7283-0928-3.

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Technical studies focusing on the materials used, the methods and tools employed, and the craftsmen responsible for artistic production have a long history in scholarship on Roman and, to a lesser extent, Greek sculpture. Interest in the practicalities and logistics of sculptural production can be traced from the early works of H. Blümner (*Technologie und Terminologie der Gewerbe und Künste bei Griechen und Römern* [1912]) and C. Blümel (*Griechische Bildhauerarbeit* [1927]), through S. Adam's study of Archaic and Classical carving (*The Technique of Greek Sculpture in the Archaic and Classical Period* [1966]), to more recent analyses by J.-C. Bessac (*L'outillage traditionnel du tailleur de pierre, de l'Antiquité à nos jours* [1986]), M. Pfanner ('Über das Herstellen von Porträts', *JDAI* 104 [1989], 157–257) and P. Rockwell (*The Art of Stoneworking* [1993]), among others. This previously niche subject has increasingly positioned itself in the mainstream of ancient art history and major new studies like those by P. Stewart (*The Social History of Roman Art* [2008]) and J. Trimble (*Women and Visual Replication in Roman Imperial Art and Culture* [2011]) devote whole chapters to questions of production.

This volume, then, follows a well-trodden path, though the primary objects that are its main focus have never been systematically examined from this perspective. The specified aim of this volume is to explore the relationship between craftsmen and their customers through the lens of the sculptures created and used by these individuals, and in so doing examine the mechanisms which conditioned the production of sculpture more generally in the Roman world. In particular, D. is interested in models and how sculptors worked with their customers to translate these models into three-dimensional marble sculptures. To do this, two main datasets are drawn on: inscriptions mentioning sculptors and their